Coalition tries to protect youths from anti-gay harassment

Fear forces many students to leave school

By **Susan Warmbrunn**
The Gazette
Story editor Victor Greto
Headline by Sherida Warner

Regina DiPadova has spoken to high school students who have walked out into the school parking lot to find their tires slashed and the word "faggot" written all over their cars.

She's known girls who have been threatened by boys who say, "You just need a man." She's worked with teens who have been taunted and terrorized in front of teachers who turn the other way.

DiPadova is the program director of the Community Council for Adolescent Development, which sponsors Inside/Out, a support group for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered teens. She has heard these stories from students struggling to make it through school, through days of humiliations and years of no one to talk to and no one to trust.

The stories she's heard are part of the reason DiPadova's group became a member of the Colorado Safe Schools Coalition, a statewide coalition of community organizations and individuals brought together by the desire to help make school safer for youths who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered. The nearly 2-year-old program is partially modeled after similar coalitions in Washington state and Massachusetts.

High school-age students who identify themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual are up to four times as likely to have been threatened or injured with a weapon at school in the past year, according to Youth Risk Behavior Surveys, developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

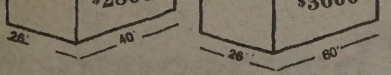
These students also were more than four times as likely to have made a suicide attempt that required medical treatment, according to the surveys.

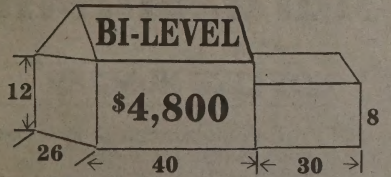
So, the coalition's goal is simple and straightforward: "We're talking about safety," said Sue Anderson, the executive director of Equality Colorado, a nonprofit organization based in Denver that works for equality for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people.

See **SCHOOLS**/NEWS3

HOT LINE NUMBER

The Colorado Safe Schools Coalition's 24-hour hot line is 888-557-4441, ext. 2.





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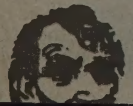

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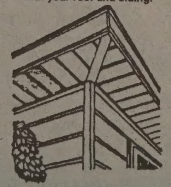

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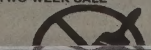

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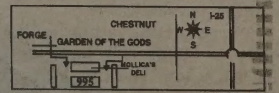

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Schools/Coalition will train teachers, counselors to help

From NEWS1

"We're talking about people being able to live their lives free of violence that's directed at them because of who they are, or who someone thinks they are," Anderson said.

The coalition provides a toll-free number youths can call to report incidents of harassment and violence and gives referrals to support groups.

Fliers reading: "Hate is wrong: Report it! Stop it!" started circulating in schools in January. The coalition also offers training for teachers and school counselors.

School personnel often are afraid to address the issue of students being threatened because they are — or are thought to be — gay and lesbian, Anderson said. Since some people see sexual orientation as a political issue, teachers and counselors often come under fire simply for talking about homosexuality, Anderson said.

Others who want to help don't know what to do or where to go.

"What we're saying is, we're available for training on this," Anderson said. "We're trying to say, 'You don't have to like gay people, but it is not OK to perpetrate acts of violence against gay people or anyone else.' "

When the harassment goes unanswered or is tacitly accepted, students often end up dropping out of school, said DiPadova.

For Tim, the taunting began long before he reached puberty.

Tim remembers being teased in third grade, when he didn't know what it meant to be gay.

He remembers wondering, "What the heck is a faggot and why doesn't anyone want to talk to me?"

When Tim was a 17-year-old junior at Doherty High School, he came back from Christmas break to find a friend had "outed" him — everybody knew he was gay.

"I had everybody in school coming up to me saying, 'Is it true you're a fag?' " Tim, now 20, recalled.

Some students told him he was going to burn in hell. Some friends dropped him. Other students threatened him.

Once, walking through the cafeteria, Tim heard someone scream, "Queer!" He turned around and faced almost the whole football team.

"I said, 'What did you say?' " Tim remembered. "They were standing all around me, saying they were going to kill me."

Two and a half months later, Tim dropped out of school.

Tim says he's doing all right now, but this scenario costs society, DiPadova said.

It costs to have kids who dread walking down the halls, who feel they can't talk to teachers or counselors, much less their parents. Heap that harassment and isolation on top of the already troubled teen years and you have more kids turning to drugs and turning on themselves, DiPadova said.

"Kids commit suicide, kids get on drugs, and that's affecting society, and it's not going to stop until we learn how to treat one another," DiPadova said.

That's what the Colorado Safe Schools Coalition is about.

"It's not about politics," said DiPadova. "It's not about gays pushing their so-called agenda. It's simply about keeping kids safe and in school so everyone has a fair chance at finishing their education."

Susan Warmbrunn covers community issues and may be reached at 636-0247 or susanw@gazette.com

hit older people hard

Patricia Merritt/The Gazette

Frances Taylor stitches a quilt at her home on Monday. The 62-year-old could have given in to depression after the deaths of her son, brother, mother and husband. Instead, she keeps active.

make seniors vulnerable to depression.

"Depression and grief are two separate emotions," said Dr. Victor Neufeld, clinical psychologist at Centura Health Penrose-St. Francis Health Services.

"Grief is a normal process and not necessarily disabling," Neufeld said. "Depression is an illness. Sometimes grief can push (seniors) over the edge."

Some major signs of depression to watch for, Neufeld said.

A senior should not be rebuked for experiencing the stages of grief, he said.

"You alone can do your grief work, but you need not do it alone," Quigley said. "You've got to find a balance.

"It's very easy to become a shut-in. There are times you will want to be alone, but you don't want total isolation, withdrawal from people."

One of the best ways to fight

passage of drunken-driving bills in the Legislature.

Taylor volunteers at the American Association of Retired Persons Widowed Services, the Senior Home Care program "Home Instead," the Colorado Springs Police Department and at her congregation, Mountain View Church of Christ. She is also an avid gardener and does quilting.

"If I sat in the house and waited for others to offer me support, I'd be left alone. I'm sure I would," she said. "If you go out and get involved, you will find that there is a tremendous amount of support around this town."

Part of the therapy at Senior Track, a program at Centura Health, is connecting older adults to the outside world, Neufeld said. Senior Track is designed to help seniors maximize their independence and quality of life.

Seniors are told about the programs and groups they can be a part of, including those offering transportation services.

Sometimes, socializing isn't enough to motivate seniors, Quigley said.

"Here's a scenario," he said. "Someone comes to me and says, 'I have a terminal disease. I have no reason to go on. I'm not suicidal or depressed. I've lived a good life, but all my loved ones are